

Healthier Workforce Enhances Economic Development

By Haley Barbour
Governor

A trend migrating across America's corporate landscape is also taking off in Mississippi, where many companies are investing in long-term economic development by creating a healthier workforce and generating access to healthcare and medicines.

The outcomes of this investment are lower medical costs, increased productivity and attraction of future employees with skills that will give them an edge over the competition. More importantly, companies that implement prevention and wellness programs have healthier and happier employees.

Here in Mississippi, as we've all been told, we consistently rank as one of the unhealthiest states in the country. Obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease and other health problems are at crisis proportions in Mississippi. Ignoring the situation won't solve the health problems that must be turned around -- so the time to act is now.

The high levels of unhealthiness cost Mississippi more than \$5 billion each year in direct and indirect costs. Obesity in our Medicare population alone costs the state almost \$800 million per year. Smoking habits are not helping things either with the Mississippi Medicaid system spending \$243 million every year treating tobacco-related illnesses. When employees stay home sick from work, their companies lose more than \$1,500 per employee per year in productivity.

We instinctively know the importance of healthier lifestyles—lower costs, more job creation, and a longer and better quality of life for all Mississippians,. But we need to turn instinct into action. You and I together must take the steps to make Mississippi healthier both at home and at work.

Mississippi businesses are beginning to invest in a healthier workforce by focusing on influencing behaviors to improve or maintain positive lifestyle choices. Through the introduction of prevention and wellness programs in the workplace, Mississippi employers are helping employees maintain their current health or commit to becoming healthier by losing weight, exercising more or quitting tobacco use. With the help of health care managers and greater access to medicines that manage chronic disease, workplace wellness programs are helping reduce the number of cases of type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and stroke, as well as reduce modifiable risks for these respective chronic diseases.

All of these efforts create a savings. And as expected, doctor visits, pharmaceutical use and allied health visits have increased—while hospital costs have decreased, reflecting an overall decrease in insurance claims. Moreover, employee satisfaction surveys show the investment is paying off, with an improvement in health and wellness there is an improvement in corporate morale.

We're taking steps at the state level, too. This year, I signed into law banning smoking in public buildings. It's a small, but important step toward a healthier Mississippi. Additionally, we've created a wellness benefit in our state employee insurance plan for the 190,000 Mississippians who depend on it.

You may be wondering if I'll practice what I preach. Because I'm eating healthier and exercise regularly, so far, I've lost nearly 25 pounds and I feel better than I have in a long time. I'm making the necessary personal choices that result in a healthier lifestyle and I encourage every family, every community, every business, every school, and every person to make healthier lifestyle choices, too -- to exercise appropriately, eat properly and not to use tobacco or illegal drugs. Living healthy means you'll live longer and feel better.

Mississippi's human resources are essential to productivity in this new economy where ideas are the key to economic output. Improving the health of Mississippi's employees and their families will improve productivity while decreasing long-term health care costs for employers and the state. More importantly, employers who are implementing prevention and wellness programs are seeing a greater return on their investment: healthier and happier employees, and that's something that makes everyone feel good.

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